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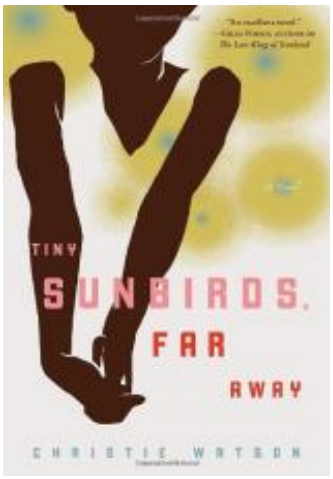
Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away

by Christie Watson



About the Book

When their mother catches their father with another woman, 12-year-old Blessing and her 14-year-old brother, Ezikiel, are forced to leave their comfortable home in Lagos for a village in the Niger Delta, to live with their mother?s family. Without running water or electricity, Warri is at first a nightmare for Blessing. Her mother is gone all day and works suspiciously late into the night to pay the children?s school fees. Her brother, once a promising student, seems to be falling increasingly under the influence of the local group of violent teenage boys calling themselves Freedom Fighters. Her grandfather, a kind if misguided man, is trying on Islam as his new religion of choice, and is even considering the possibility of bringing in a second wife.

But Blessing?s grandmother, wise and practical, soon becomes a beloved mentor, teaching Blessing the ways of the midwife in rural Nigeria. Blessing is exposed to the horrors of genital mutilation and the devastation wrought on the environment by British and American oil companies. As Warri comes to feel like home, Blessing becomes increasingly aware of the threats to its safety, both from its unshakable but dangerous traditions and the relentless carelessness of the modern world. **Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away** is the witty and beautifully written story of one family?s attempt to survive a new life they could never have imagined, struggling to find a deeper sense of identity along the way.

Discussion Guide

1. Ezikiel and Blessing share a special sibling bond. How did it change when they moved from Lagos to Warri? Do you think there was anything that Blessing could have done to save Ezikiel?

2. Blessing tells her story in her own distinct voice. How would you characterize her style as a narrator? Discuss Blessing's development from an unsure, shy girl to a confident young woman. How does each character in the novel encourage ---or stifle ---Blessing's maturation?

3. Watson originally tried writing **Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away** from the perspective of Dan, the white oil worker. How would Dan's perspective have changed the book? What insights might his narration have brought to the novel? What limitations might Watson have faced?

4. From the very first line of the novel,"Father was a loud man," it's clear that her father is of crucial importance to Blessing. How does her opinion of him change throughout the story? How does her relationship with him affect her relationships with the other men in her life?

5. Discuss the power of the women in **Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away** (Grandma's rally) versus the power of men in the novel (Alhaji, the Sibeye Boys). How does the expression of power differ between the genders?

6. It's estimated that three million girls are at risk of female genital mutilation in Africa. Discuss Grandma's choice to perform the practice. How does it inform Blessing's own career as a midwife? How do Grandma and Blessing determine where to draw the line between ethical responsibility and cultural tradition?

7. Legend and tradition play significant roles in Blessing's family --- from Grandma's stories to Alhaji's disbelief in Ezikiel's medical condition. How are religion, education, and tradition balanced in the novel? Do they coexist? When and why do they clash?

8. Though foreign companies and Nigeria's own government gain enormous wealth from the oil industry, the majority of people residing in the oil producing regions of the country continue to live in extreme poverty. How does the presence of the oil industry impact the lives of the characters in the novel? Does Watson offer any hints as to what could be done to better the situation?

Author Bio

Christie Watsontrained as a pediatric nurse at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London and worked as a senior staff nurse and educator for over ten years before joining the University of East Anglia for her MA in Creative Writing. There she won the Malcolm Bradbury Bursary for her work. Watson lives in South London with her Nigerian Muslim partner and their large dual-heritage family. This is her first novel.

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